To Please the Palate

By J. K. MUMFORD.

A MAN'S palate—unless he is drugging his imagination with "foreign" dinners in queer restaurants in lieu of a sojourn in Europe—is an index at once of his climate, his civilization and his pocketbook.

Culture and the pocketbook are variable, and forever in gastronomic conflict. Dearth of the first and redundance of the second will enthrone corned beef and cabbage on gold plate—for I have seen it done—and even wash it down with Rainwater Madeira of a cobwebby and sacrosanct age. *Eheu fugaces.*

To finance culture so that it can eat what its supersensitive palate craves is just as difficult as to civilize a pocketbook, and to do either properly requires at least two generations of something more than fasting and prayer. One does not easily wean a plebeian palate from pigs' knuckles and sauerkraut to genuine appreciation of *canape Lucille,* and no less mournful is the life being nourished on Bologna sausages and rye bread, amid haunting memories of the casserole of the "Boeuf a la Mode" in Paris and the unforgetable bouquet of Romanee Conti.

So. It's the palate, and back of that the traditions, and back of that the inevitable climate. Nine-tenths of the national and racial dietaries in the world are made by climate and ninety-nine one-hundredths of the people who live by them don't know why they do it. The chemistry of food is as unknown to them as the cuneiform writings of ancient Babylon. They eat a thing because it's handy and because their forebears have eaten it for ages unnumbered. "There was a reason," but nobody knew what it was.

And in most parts of the world they don't know yet. All they know is that it fits them. It's only where a Domestic Science brigade has started folks along the path of calory madness or the vitamine has taken hold upon imagination that people have learned to understand the diet of their daddies—and in some cases to forswear it. And this is spreading. Science has the world by the throat. Gastronomy, one of the oldest of arts—or perhaps of religions—is making way for tabloid.

The time honored palate, which has kept even the humble part of mankind bending its back six days in the week so it might revel in tasty things on Wednesdays and Sundays, is in a fair way to vanish when science really comes into its own, along with the tail and the little toe, so valuable to our prehensile ancestors. But the palate has been a grand little member. Since some millions of years before Lucullus, mankind—and womankind, to be perfectly impartial—has been spending more than a quarter of its earthly time trying to invent new ways to tickle the darned thing. On the whole it has succeeded marvelously well. It has made vittles very interesting.

This palate worship has wrought strange things. It has ransacked the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms for new juices and subtle savors; it has given birth to a vast literature—and seasoned all literature; it has woven itself into the most complicated and momentous diplomacy of nations. More treaties have really been made over the dinner table than in all the council chambers since the beginning of time. "Lunch" is the greatest adjunct of business the world around. Birth, death, marriage—commercial triumph or social success. They all spell "Eats," and will continue to do so down to the day when a little tablet laden with concentrated calories shall finally drive cooks to join the bartenders in innocuous desuetude.

It's all a matter—as I said in the beginning—of climate, culture and pocketbook—plus perhaps a pinch of tradition. But changes are on the way, and it is not amiss to begin to collect all the odds and ends of knowledge concerning food before it becomes itself a tradition. You may look with fine scorn on the fellow human who "makes a god of his stomach," or "digs his grave with his teeth," but what has engrossed the time and thought of a world, since the crust got hard enough for man to find a solid place to stand on, can be no mean subject for thought or research. What folks eat, the world around, and how tasty it is, is certainly a more piquant subject to the average human than whether the palaeozoic strata in the bed of the Rio de la Plata contain proof of man's presence in South America 200 years ago. Therefore, what indictment can stand against the man who has made it a collateral purpose of his days to eat in as many languages as possible? A very "proper study of mankind" it seems fair to say, is the vittles of mankind. They reveal him as nothing else can do.

To keep humanity stocked and running through the aeons has taken a powerful lot of food. Still humanity—at least the lucky part of it—has gone right on through the centuries getting its three meals a day—and in England and Germany they prefer six.

In New York, half of people's time is spent eating, getting ready to eat and getting over it, and since the saloons departed and people took to lickering up at home, every third shop is a restaurant. But there is yet no fixed or definite character to New York vittles. The bill of fare is in a formative stage. America is the same hodgepodge in food that it is in population. Immigrating races from all the world have set up here their food altars, but little by little all the incense of them takes on a pervasive aroma of Colonial New England. Again the climate and the tradition. The Italian restaurant doesn't stay Italian. It's only a matter of time when it must provide a succulent assortment of "pie"—or perish.

The struggle to carry on with the simon pure French or Italian, Hungarian, Swedish, Turkish, Chinese or Hawaiian food schedule ends invariably in the triumph of "ham and eggs" and the New England boiled dinner. The native dishes—the *arros con pollo* or the *fullte kohlhoven* or the *fritto misto*—you can get them by coming around on Tuesdays and Fridays. The rest of the time you might as well be in Childs's or the Eagle Hotel in Poughkeepsie for all the foreign flavor you will find.

But they all leave their mark. We are the melting pot. Along with a composite population—an amalgamated race—we are building a composite dietary. When it is blent it will be worth eating. Until then it is a patchwork and a lottery. The Frenchman has taught us the artistry as well as the nutritive value of soup. The Italian brother has made garlic respectable and established forever the fact that the *pasta* of the Mediterranean has a wider range of uses than to be baked in a basin, puddled with milk in the middle and caked with cheese on top. Spaghetti, with an endless variety of digestive sauces has become an institution, and now Mr. Heinz has immortalized it in tin as a standard food.

From these older and wiser people one and all we have learned the utility of green salads and oil. Who is so lost to shame as to put sugar on his lettuce since Giovanni came? As for the onion, it's a cult. The Chinese, in the thousand and more "food parlors" of Manhattan, have abandoned chopsticks to a large extent and added "chops and steaks" to the racial bill of fare as a concession to the American leaning, but chop suey has taught the theory of the balanced ration in its highest form. It is the gastronomic wisdom of the centuries from all lands that is being blended into a sane idea of what to do with our stomachs. And we go from one foreign restaurant to another, finding new sensations for our masterful palates and learning new tricks with which to fool our livers, so long congested with the monstrous monotony of "Colonial simplicity." I cannot help believing that the improvement in the physique of native Americans, so conspicuously shown in the vital statistics, is due to the change in American feeding since we began to "come out of Paterson."

In 1870 what American would have thought of rubbing an anchovy—if indeed he had happened to know an anchovy from a rubber overcoat—into the dressing of a salad? Or, for that matter, what American who hadn't lived in Europe knew anything about a salad anyway—unless it was "lobster" or "chicken"? And how quickly it has all happened. Why, man alive! The present generation doesn't know it, but forty years ago—perhaps a little more—the table d'hote restaurant, which was just beginning to invade New York, wasn't "respectable." To patronize one of these French iniquities was to lose your standing in the church.

Who knew, in those depressing days of cold slaw, anything about the subtle possibilities of French endive or alligator pears? To have rubbed a frying pan with garlic or put olives or bay leaves or saffron in a "stew" would almost have been "holding a lamp for the devil." And cheese. We used to say "cheese"; now we say "cheeses," with a fine accent of sophistication. In our insular and colorless days of bilious self-satisfaction cheese had hardly any place in the world except on a plate alongside a slab of pie. The idea of discarding the pie and making a dessert of the cheese was a joke when first the European brother introduced it to our shores. But in one generation—lo, the babies cry for Camembert, Roquefort, Edam, Probalone, Pont l'Eveque and a dozen more. They cost us a dollar a pound and we pay it, and to-day, what's more, are making a lot of them ourselves almost if not quite as well as they can do it in Europe.

But this America is a wide country. In spite of railroads and telephones and radio "knowledge comes and wisdom lingers" when you get a day's journey away from the big towns. In the country and its minor ganglia of population they still have cake, cake, cake. Sectional food habits die hard. The South still says its prayers to hog and hominy, hot breads and plenteous fats. The Boston palate, if there were no calendars, would still be able to "tell the world" when it was Saturday by crying out for baked beans—and have them cold for Sunday. Plymouth Rock persists.

But the gospel spreads. America, for a hundred years so noisily content with itself, is becoming aware of the rest of the world. It is withal learning the simple wisdom of vittles which older peoples have worked out through centuries of experience, albeit most of them with a far narrower range of raw material. Science, as might have been expected, finds that the workers of the Old World have been going right along on a perfectly balanced schedule since goodness knows when, without ever having heard of a calory or a vitamine.

Food science is a good deal like agriculture. Coburn of Kansas made an enormous splash some years ago by introducing alfalfa to the West. He added millions to the agricultural wealth of the country and in his home State is almost canonized. But go to the library and get a book called—if I remember rightly—"Roman Farming." It is merely a translation of the writings of Cato and Varro on agriculture. All the fine inventions that the Department of Agriculture proclaims in bulletins, the use of clovers to draw nitrogen from the air, and all the rest of it, were old in Cato's day, and alfalfa—alfalfa was the key of the whole agricultural business in ancient Italy, just as it is of Kansas to-day. The farmers of the world had forgotten their one best bet.

There's noise about soy beans, too. They are a new fangled cow feed, which seven-eighths of the farmers of America look on as a freak; but they hold some 34 per cent. of protein, and the man who has studied and sampled the vittles of the world knows that China has used them for thousands of years in a thousand forms, in the feeding of its 400,000,000 of highly procreative people. They even make candy of them. China is old and wise. Its knowledge of how to live on little is what enables it to ship eggs to the United States at ten cents a dozen. You've eaten Chinese eggs, but you didn't know it, for "hens is hens," whether they cluck in Hunan or Greene county.

What I should like to see—but assuredly never will—is a food show where there was no advertising booth for this or that Grano-Grapo-Grits, or anybody's sausage or bacon or petrified plum pudding sold by all dealers; a food show where people of all the world's races should prepare for the enlightenment and amusement of the multitude their racial foods in their own way, and eat 'em with whatever substitute for chopsticks they may be in the habit of using. Then let the food analysts get to work and figure out the calories and capture the vitamines and embalm the results in a comprehensive memorial for the good of future generations. They would be able to tell to a dot what rice and fish do in the building of the nimble and muscular Japanese and why. They would solve what to me has always been a mystery—how the French Canadian fisherman can live the hard life he does and for six or eight months of the year go practically without sleep, fight the sea, drift for bait, clean his catch, load and unload, and for half the day haul two codfish at every cast up through 180 feet of water—and do it all on a diet of nothing in the wide world but hot tea and bread and butter.

I know the chemistry of the diet is sound, because if it were not the Canadian fisherman would have been extinct long

Continued on Page Ten.